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ABSTRACT

The profound changes of the 21st century are transforming America into what must become a learning society. Never before have museums, libraries and the whole of the non-formal sector of educational institutions faced such challenges and opportunities. The demand is great for fresh and innovative thinking to construct a bold, new learning network that provides all citizens with access to learning and information. The most pressing challenge for museums and libraries may be to help conceive a new means to provide access to their resources and awareness of their roles in a learning society. A true learning society should provide widespread, integrated, systematic, and equitable access to learning resources and skills. Lifelong learning must be a continuum that complements the formal K-12 educational structure with ongoing opportunities in informal settings, such as museums and libraries, which have historically provided the kinds of learning experiences that are at the core of informal learning. Both museums and libraries are embracing the use of new technologies to reach beyond their walls, breaking through the barriers of time, economy and physical disability. In partnership, museums, libraries and others can address the digital divide and create a flexible learning ecosystem, a community campus of resources for all. Access to technology is the one part of an equitable learning society. The Institute of Museum and Library Services believes it is time to galvanize the resources of museums and libraries, in partnership with other stakeholders in lifelong learning, to construct new and more dynamic frameworks for learning, creating infrastructures that bring content and delivery systems together in fresh combinations. Sidebars highlight innovative programs from different states, illustrating how effectively museums and libraries are addressing the needs of a learning society. (AEF)

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SERVICES

The 21st Century Learner

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"Access to knowledge is the superb, the supreme act of truly great civilizations."
Toni Morrison

A Learning Society

The profound changes of the 21st century are transforming America into what must become a learning society. We enter this century in the midst of a bewildering mix of opportunity, uncertainty, challenge and change, all moving at unprecedented speed. Fueled by dazzling new technologies, increasing social diversity and divide, and radical shifts in industry and labor markets, accelerating change has become a way of life. To navigate the changes, minimize the risks and participate in shaping a new order, all Americans need access to learning throughout their lifetimes.

Never before have museums, libraries and the whole of the non-formal sector of educational institutions faced such challenges and opportunities. As the marketplace moves to exploit the commercial opportunities of new information technologies, the nation's vital public needs for education and lifelong learning can easily be ignored. The demand is great for fresh and innovative thinking to construct a bold, new learning network. Such a network must empower all citizens to participate. Access to learning across a lifetime may become among the essential civil rights of the 21st century.

The breadth of change in American society is extraordinary. At its core is the pervasive and growing role of information and communication technologies, accompanied by dramatic restructuring of the workplace and the labor market. Change is occurring in family and community life as well, as many of the traditional underpinnings of both are shifting or falling away. The pluralism and diversity of our population challenges our sense of identity and warns of new divisions as social and economic differences widen the gaps between us. At every turn a new focus on choice and individuality energizes some of us and erodes confidence and security for many others.

This period has already been titled many ways: *the information age, the knowledge age, the age of risk*. Alan Greenspan has further called today's America "*an economy of ideas*." Each title defines a time of increased emphasis on the ability to manipulate and manage our age through the application of thought and information. Such a society must become a learning society in which all people share in the opportunities to increase skills, knowledge, understanding, and the capacity to reflect on and

Five state libraries—Washington, Oregon, New Hampshire, Illinois and New Mexico—have recently enacted a Government Information Locator Service (GILS), providing residents easy and useful access to government information in their states. Whether they are seeking information about a driver's license, pesticide use, or adoption, residents can quickly find the appropriate government services. The project has developed standards for interoperability, ease of language and innovative use of technology. Through this program, the library is the enabler of good citizenship.

Through a museum and library collaborative program in Montana, eight tribes of Plains Indians are discovering more of their own heritage as the project builds a database of 1500 tribal images from the past, a resource never before available to both scholars and the general public.The collection, available through the Internet, augments the oral histories of the tribes with new information. Working together, the Montana State University and the Museum of the Rockies, are sharing and expanding their work through workshops with tribal college librarians.

adapt to change. Learning across a lifetime, supported throughout our communities, is increasingly essential to a healthy and productive society.

America must also be more than an *information society*. Information itself is raw material. What is most vital is knowing how to use information effectively to transform our world into one that is productive and supportive both to individuals and to the common good. We must become a *nation of learners*—individuals, families and communities engaged in learning in our schools and colleges, libraries, museums, archives, workplaces, places of worship and our own living rooms. Our experiences may be real or virtual, hands-on or on-line, as we engage with resources found throughout our communities or available through television, radio, the Internet or the integrated technologies of tomorrow.

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To achieve such vision, the core educational institutions across this country must assert aggressive and responsive leadership now to match the speed of technology with their will to make a difference.

Museums and libraries may be among the most vital of our nation's resources to address this challenge. Their collections and expertise are well known and trusted. They are part of America's landscape in communities of all sizes. They address all ages, reach out to all members of our society and have skillfully honed community partnership into a kind of art form. They are well prepared to meet the self-directed learner of the 21st century and to inspire the desire to learn among those less well prepared. As stewards of the artifacts of history, culture, science and the natural world, they are ready to serve as primary educators in a changing world. Their most pressing challenge may be to help conceive a new means to provide access to their resources and awareness of their roles in a learning society.

At the Lower East Side Tenement Museum new immigrants learn English through the letters and diaries of immigrants of an earlier century. They discover that their feelings of confusion and loss were shared by others long ago. They feel less lonely and are buoyed by the triumphs and progress of those who came before them.

In upstate New York, a "self-help" job-finding system, centered in rural public libraries, brings important information and guidance to residents seeking employment. The Rural Access to Job Information program is a creative partnership, developed by the Pioneer Library System, that forges links between forty-two public libraries and the New York State Labor Department. It is enabling countless residents to polish their resumes, gain useful job-seeking advice and find out about employment opportunities.

Learning in a New Age

There is great imperative to creating a learning society. Today's businesses rely on innovation and creative application of new technologies. The most valued employees are those who continue to learn, who are able to think for themselves, apply problem-solving skills and adapt rapidly. High-quality learning supports good citizenship, as well, developing informed and thoughtful citizens who are renewing and revitalizing our communities. Leisure and learning also go hand-in-hand, as Americans seek to learn more about their place in a changing world.

The shift to a new economy radically changes many things, including how we are provided the opportunity to learn. A true learning society should provide widespread, integrated, systematic, and equitable access to learning resources and skills. Everyone should know how and where to find information. All should be able to participate in learning activities and to gain the confidence that fosters and sustains healthy individuals and communities. Such a system is more possible today than ever before if the informal learning institutions across our country find new ways to extend their reach and build a network of their assets.

Lifelong learning goes across all ages, providing opportunities in both formal and informal settings. It should equip one to understand issues, learn new skills, exercise choice and make important personal judgements. It should teach critical thinking skills that allow individuals to take greater responsibility for their own personal growth. It should be within the reach of everyone. Such opportunities may reflect the definition written by Jacques Delors, on behalf of UNESCO:

Learning should be based on four "pillars": learning to live together; learning to know; learning to do and learning to be.[1]

The learning age requires a daring new vision. The responsibility for learning is not the exclusive preserve of formal educational institutions and training centers; it is a community-wide responsibility. Lifelong learning must be a continuum that complements the formal, K-12 educational structure with ongoing opportunities in informal settings. It should reflect new understandings of brain development and educational psychology, studies that emphasize the social nature of learning and the need for personal, intrinsic motivation. It should be flexible, efficient, readily available and embedded in daily life.

"Our libraries, archives, historical societies, cultural institutions, schools and universities are the DNA of our civilization."
Vartan Gregorian

Museums and Libraries: At the Center of Lifelong Learning

Museums and libraries are at the heart of such a bold vision for lifelong learning. Museums and libraries are richly endowed learning resources, built within the fabric of our communities. Their collections form the bedrock of learning in every discipline from art to science, from history to the natural world. A report from the National Museum Directors Conference of the United Kingdom called that nation's cultural sector "...our country's second education sector," [2]—a quote equally applicable to the vast numbers of museums and libraries serving communities across the United States.

Museums and libraries have historically provided the kinds of learning experiences that are at the core of informal learning:

- They are trusted, engaging and stimulating resources for families and communities.
- They exemplify the highest standards of stewardship for the collections and ideas in their care.
- They offer authentic, first-hand encounters with the objects and information they collect.
- They customize learning experiences of high quality to meet the needs of many different audiences, from amateurs to experts.
- They offer superb scholarship, finely honed teaching expertise and tested strategies for working in their communities.
- They teach the skills of information literacy, enabling users and visitors to discern quality and think critically.

Museums and libraries are well positioned to meet the demands of lifetime learning. Throughout their history, both institutions have been deeply engaged in the critical work of creating and serving learners. They have rich histories as partners with schools and universities. Museum and school partnerships have incorporated learning standards and curriculum basics, building strong complementary programming.

School and university libraries have stood at the center of learning campuses, providing a dazzling breadth of resources and the capacity to link learners well beyond the campus limits.

The Queens Borough Public Library (New York) serves the most diverse county in the United States. Its collections and programs address the needs of residents who speak as many as 120 different languages. The library not only builds book collections in different languages, it also runs the second largest English-as-a-second-language program in the United States, helping newcomers become an active part of their new community.

At the Museum of American History of the Smithsonian Institution, a powerful exhibit, *From Field to Factory*, portrays the migration of African Americans to the cities of the North following the Civil War. Not only does it tell of that powerful movement in American history, but it also resonates with all people who have undergone the agony of displacement and dislocation.

Museum and library programs include far more than content alone. Librarians are essential knowledge navigators, developing search tools that enable users to seek information in constructive, logical paths. Museums, likewise, accompany objects and artifacts of known authenticity with respected scholarship. They present objects layered with information and encourage examination, analysis and questioning. Museums and libraries are experts at cutting through the overwhelming glut of information that characterizes our age and teaching the skills of visual learning and critical thinking—the skills that develop lifetime learners.

Museums and libraries invite purposeful use and forge links to the world beyond their walls. In all that they do, they are working toward the need for social inclusion. Free and equitable access to information is the hallmark of the library experience and stands as a core principle of a democratic society. Through service and access, libraries meet the needs of a changing society. Libraries reach out to every age, setting expectations for learning across a lifetime. A single library may present new parents with an infant's first book, provide story times for toddlers, run homework centers for students, develop teen centers and mentoring programs and take carts full of books to nursing care facilities.

In a pluralistic society both libraries and museums facilitate comfort with cultural diversity. Exhibits and programming tell the stories of once forgotten Americans, bringing to light the histories of minorities and various ethnic groups. New research into the histories of women, children, laborers and the common man fuels learning experiences of all kinds. Such learning enables cross-cultural understanding, encouraging visitors to validate their own identities and find commonalities with others. Museum collections can celebrate the richness of a community, capturing the drama of an individual story and connecting it to the universality of the human experience.

Museums and libraries are already creating rich places for learning, both real and virtual. Both are embracing the use of new technologies to reach beyond their walls, breaking through barriers of geography, time, economy and physical disability. They are building digital libraries of teaching and learning materials, using technology to invite discovery, activity and the creation of new learning communities. Their programs invite exchange between the institutional experts and the knowledge of the public, adding to content, innovation and meaningful exchange.

The sampling of programs highlighted throughout this text illustrates how effectively museums and libraries are currently addressing the needs of a learning society through such activities as:

- Providing access to essential life skills.
- Celebrating diversity through new collections and programs.
- Building bridges to formal educational institutions.
- Expanding K-12 education into the after school hours.
- Forming partnerships that meet community needs.

Toward a New Vision

The power and reach of museums and libraries to address all topics and all ages is indisputable. It may be that no other institutions have more resources to support learning across a lifetime. But, it is increasingly clear that museums and libraries can not succeed alone. The bold vision for the future must be a new kind of network, an infrastructure or system of complementary resources, tools and connections that serve the varied paths of today's learners.

A free choice learning infrastructure must have the ability to reach and engage diverse audiences and support a multiplicity of learning styles. Lifelong learning is by nature learner-centered, personalized, inquiry-driven and activity-based.

An infrastructure to support such needs must include broad and varied content, a commitment to physical and intellectual access and a delivery system that can support urban, suburban and rural needs.

In partnership, museums, libraries and others can create a flexible learning ecosystem, a community campus of resources for all. They can address the learning divide that threatens our society and explore ways to provide the skills, resources, tools and learning dispositions that all learners need.

In his commencement address to the Class of 2000 at Howard University, William E. Kennard, Chairman of the Federal Communications Commission, warned students that "...ensuring that all Americans have access to technology is the civil rights challenge of this millennium. We will not meet this challenge until all of our children are as interested in becoming Michael Dell as they are in becoming Michael Jordan—when they would rather have the latest laptops than the latest hightops."

A widespread collaboration in Colorado is creating a digital library of information about the state, its history, people and places—a resource that will eventually be accessible to all. The project is collecting digital images from the scientific, cultural and historical collections of Colorado's museums, libraries, archives and historical societies. Bringing them together in a central, virtual collection will lead to new understandings about many aspects of the state's unique character.

Access to technology is the one part of an equitable learning society. The desire to acquire information, the skill to find it and the ability to use it well are also essential. Museums and libraries work toward all of these goals. Libraries are not only the #1 point of access for those who do not have Internet use at home or at work, they are also teachers of information seeking skills. Museums encourage discovery. Through the power of objects, they help visitors link their worlds to those of other times and places. Through both content and context, museums teach visual thinking skills, using tangible objects to help visitors understand and respect the diversity of their worlds.

The Institute of Museum and Library Services believes it is time to galvanize the resources of museums and libraries, in partnership with other stakeholders in lifelong learning, to construct new and more dynamic frameworks for learning, creating infrastructures that bring content and delivery systems together in fresh

Wisconsin Public Television and the Wisconsin State Historical Society are joining forces to form the Wisconsin Collections, an on-going and comprehensive magazine-style television series to explore the state's rich history. Partnering the vast archival resources of the historical society with the technical expertise of the Wisconsin Public Television will bring meaningful stories into both homes and classrooms. Opportunities for enhanced technologies, combining television and Internet services, will increase the use of in-depth historical information.

combinations. Old boundaries will have to be erased and new collaborations spawned. Our communities are filled with potential partners: public radio and television, community service organizations, the faith community, community colleges and universities—all of whom offer both allied and complementary assets to museums and libraries. We believe we can best extend the learning process through innovative collaboration.

Partnerships will need to be organic and authentic, based on deeply rooted, shared missions, transforming projects into processes. Collaborative strategies may be built around the central idea of access, developing a confederation of educational institutions that support the concept of community as a learning campus. Such a model will be primarily concerned not with what is learned but with how learning takes place and is supported through an innovative approach to infrastructure.

The impact of technology on this transition is profound. By erasing the boundaries between institutions, technology offers unprecedented access to information and unlimited potential for combining resources and the ideas inherent in them.

Well-used, technology could truly unlock the power of collections, creating broad public access and facilitating a fresh spirit of inquiry. As television goes digital, for example, the computer and the television set are becoming compatible and interchangeable.

In its recent publication, *Connecting Communities*, the Benton Foundation asks:

> *"How can they [new technologies] be used to promote education, democracy, public health and hundreds of other interests that are our daily concerns? How can they be harnessed by teachers, librarians, museum directors, doctors, farmers, care-givers, welfare officers, workforce trainers, home learners, public safety officials, minority groups and volunteer associations?"* [3]

The Benton Foundation study illustrates how many institutions, committed to public service, are addressing such awesome challenges through the building of technology-based alliances. These collaborations use technology to reach outside their walls and into homes, classrooms and the workplace. The new world of broadband communications offers extraordinary opportunities for the integration of computers, television, radio, satellites, telephone and wireless communications in the service of learning. Imagine such opportunities at the heart of a confederation of learning institutions.

Like museums and libraries, the public service telecommunications sector is examining the challenge of the future and the role for partnership. Public broadcasting is driven by a service mission that parallels that of museums and libraries and is similarly seeking new partnerships in a digital age. In defining the challenges currently faced by public service telecommunications, the Century Fund and the Carnegie Corporation have signaled the need for a broadened public alliance. They reference the exclusion of many of our country's key cultural institutions, libraries and archives within the television age and caution that these public service institutions" ...cannot afford to be left behind in the digital and Internet age." [4]

Addressing similar concerns, the Institute of Information Policy of Pennsylvania State University and Penn State Public Broadcasting have formed Partners in Public Service to explore the changing roles of public broadcasting in a digital age. Central to their agenda for a national conference is the development of a powerful new dialogue between public broadcasting, museums and libraries.

In Connecticut, a comprehensive project called Connecticut Classroom will draw from significant museum and library collections to document the state's history. The collection of graphic images and historical information is being designed to enrich classroom curriculum. The project is placing emphasis on teacher preparation, working with teachers across the state to learn how to make meaningful use of the materials with their students.

The Association of Youth Museums is taking the first steps to build partnerships that amplify the voices of children in American society. Their partners in social and civic services are discussing how to build on the respected experiences of youth museums to connect to vital issues facing children and families. Many youth museums run exemplary programs, such as the parenting library within the Houston Children's Museum where adults can add to their parenting skills while their children play in the adjacent Tot Spot.

A Call to Action

With so much at stake, the Institute of Museum and Library Services invites you to join the conversation about museums, libraries and the 21st century learner. IMLS initiated the conversation with a Washington-based roundtable in March 1999. Since then, IMLS staff has conducted a series of open forums at professional meetings across the country. We have initiated discussions with other providers of lifelong learning opportunities and have engaged private and public funders in consideration of building funding and programmatic partnerships.

In the fall of 2001, IMLS will host a national conference on the roles of museums and libraries in a learning society. We expect to encourage a wide geographical representation and invite participation from teams of museums, libraries and other partners who have already begun exploring collaborative ideas. We are encouraging

a tone of experimentation, a laboratory-like approach to enabling museums and libraries to play leading roles in the building of a learning society. We are working toward securing funding for a follow-up set of demonstration projects that will test innovative models for collaboration.

We invite you to join the conversation about these very important issues and responsibilities by responding to the ideas put forth in this position paper. Please consider such questions as:

- How do you define a learning community?
- What is the capacity of museums and libraries to address lifelong learning needs?
- Who are the other players in meeting these needs?
- What models for collaboration are already out there?
- What might an informal learning infrastructure look like?
- How might technology be employed to serve new collaborations?
- How can we assure inclusion in a new learning society?
- Who else should consider these questions?

IMLS invites you to share your thoughts in any appropriate format—from a written response to an email message. Direct email to bsheppard@imls.gov. We will use our website http://www.imls.gov and other publications to share ideas and continue this very vital consideration of one of the most provocative challenges to museums and libraries in the 21st century.

Beverly Sheppard

Notes

[1] Jacques Delors, et al. *Learning: The Treasure Within*, Report to UNESCO of the International Commission on Education for the Twenty-First Century, 1996.

[2] National Museum Directors Conference. New Museums and the Learning Age, 1999.

[3] Richard Somerset-Ward. *Connecting Communities: Public Media in the Digital Age*. The Benton Foundation, 2000.

[4] Case Statement, *Fulfilling the Promise of Public Service Telecommunications in the Digital and Internet Age*. The Century Fund, 1999.

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Beverly Sheppard

Beverly Sheppard was appointed Acting Director of the Institute of Museum and Library Services on March 25, 1999. She has been with the Institute since June 1998 when she was named the first Deputy Director of IMLS with responsibility for the Office of Museum Services. Ms. Sheppard has more than 16 years of professional museum experience and is known for her work in museum education. Ms. Sheppard is the author of several publications, including the highly acclaimed ***Building Museum and School Partnerships***, a text that is widely used in museum education and teacher training programs. Prior to joining IMLS, Ms. Sheppard held the position of Associate Director of the Chester County Historical Society in West Chester, Pennsylvania.

Ms. Sheppard has extensive experience in museum professional organizations. She served two terms as President of the Pennsylvania Federation of Museums and Historical Organizations, working closely with the Governor and Pennsylvania State Legislature to establish state policies and to increase budget support of museums. Under her leadership the Federation spearheaded successful partnerships among museum leadership, Pennsylvania Departments of Education and Tourism and other state agencies.

She earned a Bachelor of Arts in Art and English from Bucknell University and a Master of Arts in Studio Art from Marywood College. Ms. Sheppard formerly taught art and art history on the faculties of the University of Scranton and Marywood University.

The Institute of Museum and Library Services

The Institute of Museum and Library Services is an independent Federal agency that fosters leadership, innovation and a lifetime of learning by supporting the nation's museums and libraries. Created by the Museum and Library Services Act of 1996, P.L. 104-208, IMLS administers the Library Services and Technology Act and the Museum Services Act. IMLS has an annual budget of approximately $190 million. There are 122,000 libraries and 10,000 museum sites in the United States and its Territories. IMLS receives policy advice from two Presidentially-appointed and Senate-confirmed entities: the National Commission on Libraries and Information Science and the National Museum Services Board. For more information contact: Institute of Museum and Library Services, 1100 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W., Washington, DC, 20506, (202) 606-8536, or visit **www.imls.gov**.

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